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ABSTRACT

This presentation discusses the question, "What makes a parent program effective?" by reviewing some of the author's professional experiences within a framework of a planning model borrowed from Lillie and Maslow. The planning model consists of four components: information, interaction, involvement, and insight. The four components may be present in parent programs in different amounts and differing degrees of success. Programs are seen to undergo distinct stages of growth and development. Initially, information is directed one way. If the information presented to parents is not immediately useful, parents may not attend later sessions. It is advisable to be parsimonious with information and to provide opportunities for parents to interact during presentations through question and discussion sessions and through narration of their own and their children's experiences. It is important to recognize that interested parents have considerable expertise in most topics related to their children. Transition to the involvement stage of parent participation in child service programs demands more support and direction from program personnel to parents. If trust is built through interaction and involvement, parents may exhibit a greater willingness to attempt new ideas and practices. Guidelines for providing information, facilitating interaction, and promoting involvement and insight are offered. (Author/RH)

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Designing Effective Parent Experiences

A presentation to the National
Conference on Parent Involvement

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Designing Effective Parent Programs

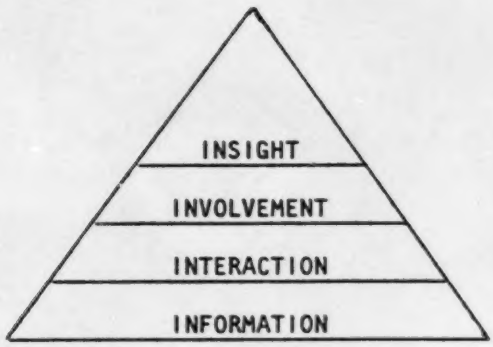
Perhaps the most persistent problem expressed by parent program planners is the failure of particular roles they select for parents to play.

Parents may show a poor attendance record at meetings, seem to express few interests of their own, or provide little cooperation in conducting social or program activities. In other programs, parent participation may be active, positive and varied. What is the difference? What causes some parent programs to succeed and others to fail?

Over the past several years, I've had the opportunity to work with a variety of parent development programs in New Jersey including; Project Head Start, Day Care, ESEA Title I, PTAs, foster parent groups, drug rehabilitation and prevention programs, and programs for the handicapped and for the gifted. These contacts with parent program planners, and with parents themselves, have been valuable for me because they have given me some experience necessary to begin asking the question: "What makes a parent program effective?"

In the limited time available to us today, I'd like to try to begin a response to this question by reviewing some experiences which may be helpful in the planning and execution of parent development programs. I'm going to refer to a general type of planning model which has been borrowed from David Lillie and Abraham Maslow. Lillie has suggested the categories and Maslow provided a sense that these categories are developmental in nature.

At various times in various combinations and in differing degrees, there are four components which seem to be a part of some of the most effective parent programs.



Parents as Givers and Receivers of Information

Most programs have this component in place. That is, they generate a certain quantity of information to share with the parent; about the program and its services, about child development and parenting, or about resources available to parents within a given community. Advantages of this component focus include discovery by the parent of resources he/she can use in strengthening the parental role. Disadvantages include a possible 'overload' of information which may seem irrelevant to the parent or which is untranslatable because of the amount of jargon used to express the information.

Parents in Active Involvement

Some programs provide opportunities for sharpening skills in personal interaction, usually between parent and child. By presenting a topic 'hook,' such as communication, homework, problem-solving, or discipline, programs seek to actively encourage parents to self-consciously examine some of their child-rearing attitudes and strategies with the hope of adopting a more positive alternative. An obvious advantage of interaction components is that they can be powerful tools in helping parents adopt more effective practices in the process of child rearing. Additionally, parents are able to find much-needed support from interaction with other parents in the program. An important disadvantage seems to be that a basic level of skill or insight is necessary in the development of this kind of material. Interaction is sometimes conducted with "high-risk" activities which can damage parent self-esteem, often placing the parent in a nearly-forgotten role of unsuccessful student.

Parent Insight Resulting in Change

At their best, parent programs provide genuine insight to parents. They can provide more satisfactory ways of relating not only to children, but to other adults as well. They can give parents a genuine understanding of the goals of a social service program. An advantage of this component is that it enables a parent to take on more initiative in support of the child and program. The leading disadvantage of this component is that it must be carefully built on many prerequisite experiences and thus requires significant amounts of time in building both trust and new skills.

The Growth and Development of Parent Programs

The four components (Information, Involvement, Interaction, Insight) may be present in programs in different amounts, and with differing degrees of success. I'm going to suggest here that, like a growing child, a parent program undergoes very distinct stages of growth and development.

A program initially begins with a fairly strong dependence on information as an early approach to parents, and there is often a comfortable attitude toward the use of information as program content. So long as information is directed one way, it may not be necessary to do anything about the information. The posture taken is one of a spectator which requires little risk. In many cases, the distribution of information satisfies the need of program planners to "do something" with parents. For their part, parents may be somewhat relieved not to have to involve themselves after a busy day and are content to limit their participation to the reception of information. The problem in making information effective is that of education as a whole--it is

necessary for the learner to feel some need for the information being presented it is to become part of memory much less an understanding that changes behavior.

A Silent "Vote"

If the information presented to parents in early sessions does not have an immediately useful character, it is not uncommon for parents to "vote with their feet" and not to attend later sessions. Because these early sessions are crucial in building the support of parents, it is important to be very stingy with information and to provide opportunities for parents to question, discuss, and add their own experiences and those of their children to inform presentations. It is not unusual to have a 'translator' available who can help the parents understand and interpret the "professional" ideas being presented by a presenter. The editing of handout materials is also important if the information contained in them is to be read and understood by its readers.

The Parent as "Expert"

In beginning activities depending on interaction by parents, it is important to recognize that they have considerable expertise on most of the topics of interest to them about their children. The skill needed in such activities is to help parents draw from their own experience the valuable information they all have to share. There is a strong tendency for many parents to feel that parenting is a "professional" activity beyond their control in certain ways. The scores of books and articles on the "profession" of parenting can create as much uncertainty as help when consulted by a parent who has

begun to doubt his/her child-rearing skills, particularly when the "rule" or practice given in the textbook doesn't work when applied by the parent.

The greatest value of interaction activities for many parents is in learning that other parents have similar concerns and problems. It is this feeling of not being alone that is so reassuring to parents who may have few resources in home or immediate community for personal support. Once the climate for support has been established, material which suggests possible alternatives for change can be introduced. It is important however, to recognize that the need for personal support is never abandoned, and that the material presented needs to be developed in conjunction with support strategies.

Full Participation

The movement into involvement activities depends on the kinds of experiences parents have had with each other prior to the date of a program or social event. If a certain level of trust and interest has not been established, it is likely that an involvement event can fail for lack of interest. In planning involvement it is also important to realize that the child is the link between the parent and the program and that the child is the most successful focus for involvement. In practice this may mean a materials-building workshop, family art night, family photo display, family pot-luck supper, or just a simple 'open house' program at the program site. A frequently disappointing effort to involve parents in the life of a program has been to have them act as tutors, aides or helpers in the classroom or center. While many parents do effectively participate in these kinds of involvement activity, the introduction of someone into a new environment with new rules always demands strong support. If the task

availabl
e is not clearly understood or consists of random 'busy work,'
it is nc
t difficult to understand the resentment or lack of interest
that may
occur. It is not too inaccurate to state that an effective
involvem
ent in the life of a child service program demands planning
and comm
itment nearly equal to the child services themselves, at least
for a ce
rtain period of time. It is probably at the involvement level
that mos
t programs experience their greatest sense of frustration in
what may
be perceived as a 'lack of interest' on the part of the
parent.
It is more likely, however, that the needs of the parent for
support
and direction in a new environment have done unanswered.

The "Pay Off"

As
the level of trust is developed through interaction and
involvem
ent, the parent may exhibit a greater willingness to attempt
new idea
s and practices. This is particularly true if a 'support
group'
s maintained by the program where parents can discuss their
experien
ces in trying out new strategies and approaches.
As
parents find a comfortable situation in which they can express
their co
ncerns, they discover that these conflicts are shared by other
parents
With a sense that they are not 'alone,' parents may be more
willing
to consider and apply different approaches to child-rearing.
Suc
cess with one new idea encourages openness to others and the
parent
akes on a more active role in planning and organizing additional
group ac
tivities, and in seeking new experiences.
The
sequence of events I've just traced describes a general
pattern
of growth that I've noted within successful parent programs
of our s
tate.

I've come to believe that the exact nature of parent activity isn't nearly as important as how 'ready' the parents are for that particular type of activity. That parents have opportunities for meaningful activity in the program; that the information made available to them is in some useful form; that interaction with other adults is provided--all are important elements that must be sequenced in a manner that is appropriate to specific needs of local parents. It is the mix and timing of these experiences that seems to characterize the more sucessful parent program.

Parent Experience Guidelines

1. Information
   - -- Use information sparingly. Sort through it, translate it, paraphrase it, and generally make it as relevant as possible to the immediate concerns of parents as possible.
   - -- Have a 'facilitator' available to help guest speakers connect their topic with the experience of the parents and the local community.
   - -- Give opportunities within a presentation of information for parents to contribute their own experiences on the topic. Several pauses during a presentation are better than "holding" questions until the end.

2. Interaction
   - -- Design activities that depend on the participation of parents either as sharing partners or as contributing members of small groups. The use of 'recorders' can help encourage individual sharing with less risk.

-- Select beginning activities with a low factor of risk. The amount of personal information requested can increase with a base of successful experiences.

-- Take informal 'minutes' of interaction sessions so that parents can have an opportunity to reflect on these events. Use the responses to generate other interests.

3. Involvement

-- Try to insure that the parents have had some opportunity to get to know each other during interaction sessions

-- Be sure that the responsibility for the involvement activity is clearly defined. In the case of classroom assistance, be sure that the tasks are meaningful and do not depend on skills or understandings the parent may not have.

-- Be sure to develop a system for recognition of the involvement effort by the parent, if only a polite mention at a program meeting.

4. Insight

-- Provide opportunities that enable parents to reflect on their experiences with the program ("I discovered, I found...")

-- Provide opportunities for periodic review of the parent program by staff members as well as parents.